

Interview with John A. McKesson III

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR JOHN A. MCKESSON, III

Interviewed by: Arthur Day

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Q: We will want to concentrate in the end on your more senior posts, but perhaps you could begin by giving an account of your entry into the service and on into your first post.

MCKESSON: My parents moved to France when I was quite young so I had part of my early education in France up to the French baccalaureate and then came back and entered Columbia as a junior and got my AB at 19 and MA at 20, which was a good thing as the war had started and I entered the Navy in 1942 and spent four years in the service. I took the Foreign Service exam when I was still in uniform, passed the written, and was then told at the orals that I did well except that I was not American enough, because of my earlier French education. I was told that I would not have to take the written exam again but could take the oral the next year if I could go out and "Americanize" myself. I was not sure what I should do. It was the summer of 1946, and I decided to participate in the election campaign in New York City against Vito Marcantonio, who was a very left-wing member in the U. S. Congress in those days. Then I went out to Akron, Ohio where I got a job with the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, studied American history, came back a year later, passed the orals and entered the service in 1947.

Q: Was your first post in Berlin?

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MCKESSON: My first post was in Reykjavik, Iceland which turned out to be a very interesting assignment. I did consular work there to begin with. Then the Marshall Plan was started. An ECA mission was set up in every country in Western Europe, including Iceland. As it was such a small country they named the minister, who was the head of the legation there, as the head of the ECA mission, and he needed only one assistant. I happened to be chosen, and I became the deputy chief of the ECA mission, the information officer, the finance officer, etc. I would go back and forth to Paris about every other month during the rest of my tour in Iceland for the various meetings (program, information, finance...). I even attended two or three chiefs of mission meetings when the minister was too busy with his other responsibilities to go to Paris for ECA. I would sit at the table, as a brand-new FSO, with people like David Bruce, Zellerbach, Hoffman and Harriman. They were all, I think, as amused as I was.

Q: That was before Iceland became so much involved in the American defense perimeter?

MCKESSON: Iceland, of course, had become very important during World War II when first the British sent troops there, and then we did. We had troops there all during the war. We pulled them all out at the end of the war, but then they came back with NATO. During the war we had as many troops as there were male Icelanders so that did cause some problems. We tried to keep our troops totally on the base, away from Reykjavik, so they would not disrupt the local community too much.

Q: You went from there to Berlin?

MCKESSON: From Iceland I went back to Washington briefly in the Director General's office, then I got into the German area training program where I spent some time in Washington and Middlebury College, and then I had a full academic year of German studies at Columbia. Following that I was assigned to Berlin for three years and then Bonn for two years.

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Q: 1951?

MCKESSON: 1951 I went to Berlin.

Q: *Things were still quite primitive then?*

MCKESSON: Very primitive. I had been to Berlin in '37 as a child. My parents had taken me there, and I still had recollections of a city that was thriving, full of energy, and storm troopers marching in the streets, shiny cars all over, great activity. Of course the Berlin I saw when I got there in '51 was a totally dead city, block after block had been laid completely to rubble. You might have one or two houses standing in the whole block, and the rest were all in ruins. The streets were virtually empty. The few of us who had cars could park anywhere because there was no traffic.

Q: *You could cross to the east without trouble?*

MCKESSON: Diplomats could go to East Berlin with no problem. I even got to Leipzig for the fair there on one occasion. Berlin was beginning to pick up by 1951. The spirit of the Berliners was amazing. There was a great esprit de corps among the Allies and the Berliners, more than at any of my other posts. The French, the Americans, the British, along with the West Berliners, we were all, in a sense, behind the Iron Curtain together.

Q: *What was your assignment there?*

MCKESSON: I was doing economic work. Part of the time I was in commercial work, reporting trying to help local firms that were setting themselves up in West Berlin. I was also involved in East-West trade. That was the only occasion when I got involved in the Cold War. This was after the blockade, and it looked for a while as if the Russians might be starting trouble again. The Soviets and the East Germans began refusing to give permits for goods moving between Berlin and the West. There was a document called a Warenbegleitschein and they would approve some and disapprove some. The number

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they approved and disapproved varied from month to month. It was a stranglehold on the city, reducing supplies while at the same time never really cutting it off. The situation never reached a dramatic stage threatening war, but it was causing real problems.

Q: At that point, I suppose, the German government, such that it was, in Bonn, the nascent government, really played no real role in Berlin at all.

MCKESSON: No, not at all. Of course it was very interested in it, but it was strictly the three Western Allies running the show in the West. The fiction of a quadripartite Berlin had already broken down with the Soviets running East Berlin.

Q: Did you have much contact with the American military?

MCKESSON: No, not much at all. Of course we had a military general who was the top commandant for our sector, then Cecil Lyon was the senior civilian as his deputy.

Q: Then you went on to Bonn in 1953?

MCKESSON: I went on to Bonn. I was transferred to the political section where I did the work again mostly on German activities in Europe, with the British and French. That was one of my only regrets in my many years in Germany, that I never really got to work with Germans; I was mainly working with my British and French colleagues. My wife and I tried to complement that by going to the theater a lot and meeting Germans outside.

Q: This period you were there was really the transition from occupation to independence?

MCKESSON: It really was, exactly. Just at that point the High Commission became the embassy and things turned gradually back to normal relations. Germany was picking up very fast thanks to all the U. S. help and assistance.

Q: How did that affect your work? Was it essentially the same as it was under the occupation?

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MCKESSON: Yes, it really did not affect my work at all.

Q: The German government actually came into being as a fully independent government.

MCKESSON: That's right. I dealt some with German officials, but at a quite low level at that point.

Q: Did an ambassador come during that time?

MCKESSON: Yes, Ambassador Conant was our ambassador and then I believe we had Bruce. I had very little contact with the ambassador. Dowling was our deputy chief of mission at the time and Lloyd Steer was my immediate boss as head of the political section.

Q: As far as your work was concerned in the political section, neither the changes in the embassy or the German government had anything to do with you?

MCKESSON: No, not at all.

Q: What impressions did you have of the Germans at that time? Did you have the feeling that they had taken a real turn towards a democratic path after the war?

MCKESSON: Well, it is always hard to judge something like that. Nobody admits to having been a Nazi, after it was all over everybody was always a democrat. To the extent you can, of course, sense peoples' feelings by getting to know them, having them to your homes and so forth I certainly felt very definitely, as far as Berlin was concerned as I mentioned earlier, that there was a great feeling of comraderie between the West Berliners and the Allies and I had excellent contacts and I don't think I have served in any post, including Western European ones, where the people were more friendly.

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Q: And then from there you went all the way around the world to Saigon in 1955. You were there for how long?

MCKESSON: For two years. From March '55 to April '57.

Q: The initial period you were there must have still been affected by the French defeat and the effects that that had throughout Indochina. How did that look to you at the time?

MCKESSON: As far as the French were concerned, it was perfectly clear that all during that period and even after that when I went to Africa, the French still had a concern that somehow we Americans were out to replace them, to take advantage of their having lost the war in Vietnam. This, of course, was something you sensed; they did not openly accuse you of it. I saw a fair amount of my French colleagues in Saigon and they were all very pleasant as far as that went.

The striking thing about my tour there, as far as I was concerned, was the fact that it was practically the only period for many decades that that poor country was in a state of peace as far as the Viet Cong, or Viet Minh as they were then called, was concerned. My wife and I traveled all over, not only in the Saigon area, but we went up to Da Lat, Hue, and Cambodia. We went several times to Phnom Penh and saw Angkor Wat, and had no problems at all. The only fighting that was still going on was between the government and several of the sects, the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, the Binh Xuyen being the main ones.

Q: That took place right in Saigon?

MCKESSON: The only one that took place in Saigon was the Binh Xuyen. The Hoa Hao and Cao Dai were mostly active outside Saigon, not too far away, but outside Saigon itself. The Binh Xuyen, who practically controlled Cholon, which was the neighbor city to Saigon, did put up resistance and when the government moved in at a certain point to try to put an end to it, there was an out and out battle that lasted several days right in Saigon and I remember there was fighting going on right outside my own house. My wife and I shared a

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house with Frank Meloy, who was head of the political section and who had the other half. The government had set up soldiers with machine guns just outside our front door. We, of course, stayed inside and during that two or three day period we could hear the guns going off. Actually nobody ever came into the house, but the war was brought fairly close to us. The Binh Xuyen were defeated.

Q: I think off and on during those years there was some terrorist activity?

MCKESSON: There were quite a few terrorist activities, several of the sect leaders themselves were arrested and decapitated and others were assassinated, and they themselves assassinated some people. The house where I lived had an interesting history. I remember several years later when I was back in the states reading in Life magazine an account of Vietnam and there was a picture of that house. That is where the Viet Cong, during the Tet offensive, had moved in and actually gotten into the house, and an American colonel who was standing on the stairs had shot a Viet Cong who was attempting to come up. That was the old house I lived in at 5 Rue de Massige, as it was then called and subsequently named Mac Din Chi.

Q: I was interested in your traveling around the country. It had changed so much by the time we all became familiar with it by the press accounts. Did you also go up into North Vietnam?

MCKESSON: Unfortunately not. It was practically impossible, of course, because after the Geneva accords, which were signed shortly after Dien Bien Phu, the North and South were separated. It was supposed to be just a short separation, but it became permanent and the French continued for some time to have an envoy up there in contact with the Vietnamese, but we Americans never did. I think Tom Corcoran made a trip up there once during that period, but it was normally out of bounds for us.

Q: What was your role in the embassy?

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MCKESSON: I was assigned to the political section, and was number two in the section, which was relatively small. We had about five or six officers, and when Frank Meloy left, which was about half way through my tour, I became acting chief of the section until I left. When Freddie Reinhardt came as the ambassador, he decided that he wanted to keep me as head of the section. Although I was relatively junior, he did not want a replacement until I left.

Q: That was the period in internal politics when Diem was becoming a major figure.

MCKESSON: Diem was completely running the government. I did have a few chances to meet Diem, but of course at my level I did not have any negotiations with him. I was always impressed by several things. One, he was a man of great strength of character, very strong willed, too strong willed to suit many people, certainly a man of great integrity. I think his brother Nu and his brother's wife, Madam Nu, were notorious for having been involved in shady deals, but Diem himself was a man of strong integrity. He also had such strong views that when he had a chance to expound them to an American, he would carry on at great length. I remember that once when Secretary Dulles was coming to Saigon, he had a meeting with Diem. Diem talked the whole time in a monologue. As Dulles was coming back to the embassy, he was muttering under his breath, "You would think that he would be interested in knowing what I thought."

Q: That was an odd situation for Dulles to be in.

MCKESSON: Yes. Dulles was used to telling everyone what the word was from on high.

Q: Did you deal, in your capacity as political officer, with Vietnamese officials?

MCKESSON: I dealt with officials at all different levels including Ministers, but Diem was the only one that I did not have business contacts with. Contacts with him were pretty much confined to the ambassador, our AID mission director and CIA representative.

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Q: What impression did you have of these Vietnamese officials. Were they generally effective?

MCKESSON: Well, they were friendly, well-educated, well-informed, and I thought quite effective. I got to know the mayor of Saigon quite well, Tran Van Lam, and also the number two in the Foreign Office, who was the person I had the most contact with. He was very soft spoken and was effective. They all seemed quite dedicated. You had the impression, which I did not always have later in Africa, that the officials were well-trained for their work and really seriously attempting to do a good job.

Q: What did your work consist of in the main during this rather odd period?

MCKESSON: Mainly keeping informed of what was going on in the political field—both on the official side, what the government was doing—and what the sects were up to, what different elements outside the government might be feeling. Even in those days when Diem was in power and there was more or less a strong, one-man rule, you did have critics and opponents and they would want to come to the embassy and try to convince the embassy that they should be brought in to replace Diem. Actually I would see more of that when I was in Paris.

Q: We had an American general there at that time?

MCKESSON: Yes, General Collins was our senior representative in Saigon when I arrived. He headed the embassy and Randy Kidder was the deputy chief of mission; there was no ambassador. General Collins was in effect the ambassador, but without the title. It was when Collins left that he was replaced by a diplomat and Freddy Reinhardt became our ambassador. Which reminds me, if I may make a correction here, that I mentioned that I took over the political section when Frank Meloy left. That is not correct. Frank Meloy had a replacement, Dick Gatewood, who was briefly in Saigon as chief of the political section, and it was when Gatewood left that I was moved up and stayed on in the job.

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Q: I wonder if you had any role in the little incident in the attack on the hotel where the International Truce Commission lived?

MCKESSON: It was very amusing. We got a cable that Perle Mesta was coming with an entourage and it just so happened that both Ambassador Reinhardt and the DCM, Randy Kidder were out of town. Frank Meloy was in charge, and suddenly we got a phone call that people had invaded the hotel and that Perle Mesta was being held prisoner in her room. Frank Meloy decided that something had to be done to rescue her, so he dashed out of the embassy and told me "John, you are in charge of the embassy", and off he went. So I had nothing to do with the rescue, but Frank did get her out of the hotel and to safety. Her main concern seemed to be that somehow we had not taken care of her typewriter. She lost some effects, but we felt that we had nobly saved her life. It was all rather amusing.

Q: After Saigon you went back to Europe?

MCKESSON: Yes, I was assigned to Paris. I was there from 1957 to 1960. My first year there was the last year of the Fourth Republic. My job there was in the internal political affairs section and I got to know a number of deputies in the National Assembly, journalists and so forth. In May '58, the events in Algiers brought the return of General de Gaulle and the general elections a few months later swept out of office an awful lot of people like Mendes France and others, many of the ones I had gotten to know. A whole new wave of Gaullist deputies came in which the embassy then proceeded to cultivate. It was really a very fascinating period.

Q: From your vantage point in Paris in the embassy, what was the impact of the May military mutiny in Algiers?

MCKESSON: It was most interesting because I happened to be at the National Assembly on May 13th when General Massu had formed his Committee of Public Safety and

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announced that they had taken over power in Algeria. This was coming off the AFP [Agence France Presse] ticker which was right in the lobby of the Assembly and of course all the reporters and diplomats like myself were watching this, and shuttling between the ticker and the Assembly itself where the debate was going on for the investiture of Pflimlin, who was to be the prime minister. Ironically, nobody, none of the deputies, even discussed what was happening in Algiers. They kept talking about Pflimlin, and finally the first person who even mentioned anything that was happening in Algiers was a Communist deputy who got up and said, "Shouldn't we be talking about this Fascist coup d'etat that is taking place in Algiers?"

Eventually, as we know, de Gaulle came back. My recollections of de Gaulle's return might be of interest. A few days before he was actually asked to come back he gave a press conference at the Rue Solferino and I was able to witness it as a representative of the embassy. The room was packed, of course, with correspondents from all over. The striking thing was that where he gave the press conference was just a couple of streets from the National Assembly, the Palais Bourbon, and that on the bridge going from the Place de Concorde, all in front of the National Assembly and all around where he was giving his press conference was filled with tanks, armored cars and riot police, as if de Gaulle was going to attempt a coup, to march out of there and take over the government or something. It was all a bit ridiculous, he was just giving a press conference. At the end of the press conference everyone went home and all this police paraphernalia and tanks and everything was withdrawn.

Q: That was the conference in which he announced his readiness to...?

MCKESSON: That's right, he of course moved like a past master in several statements, moving from one thing to another, to assume the powers of the Republic, and finally when he did meet a few days later or a week or two later with Pflimlin, who had been invested by then, the meeting was an absolute dialogue des sourds as everybody reported. Pflimlin wanted him to disavow everything that was happening in Algiers first, and de Gaulle's

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position was that it was better to try to solve the situation than to start laying blame. Anyway, after this dialogue of the deaf de Gaulle went home in the wee hours of the morning and the next morning he issued a statement that he had begun the process of assuming power, which of course irritated Pflimlin no end, but there was not much he could do about it.

Q: Do you remember what your impression was at that time, of de Gaulle and the impression in the embassy? Were people gratified to see someone coming along like that?

MCKESSON: It was very interesting. The feeling in the embassy at the lower level, Dean Brown and myself and others, was certainly understanding of de Gaulle and we were willing to be quite open-minded. There was at the higher levels a feeling that traced back to attitudes of Robert Murphy who had his run-ins with de Gaulle in North Africa and the fact that, in later years, as I found out when I went to work in the Executive Secretariat under George Ball and Dean Rusk a couple of years later, there were people in Washington who were very anti-de Gaulle. George Ball was one of the leading advocates of being tough to de Gaulle. I, myself, had gotten to know a number of Gaullist deputies during that period, people like Habib Deloncle, people like Baumel, people like Peyrefitte and Olivier Guichard and a number of others, and without exception all of these deputies, senators or assistants to de Gaulle (Guichard was working in the Elys#e as de Gaulle's special assistant, chef de cabinet) were uniformly friendly to the Americans and I never had any problems in getting information from them of a general, normal diplomatic nature, or getting opinions from them; there was never any hostility of any kind.

Q: Did it seem to you that this was really a necessary move in France at that time?

MCKESSON: Oh, I think unquestionably in that respect if de Gaulle had not moved back in peacefully there would have been a military coup of some kind. What would have happened after that would have been hard to say, but it would have been much worse for

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France. I think most French, other than some diehards, would recognize that de Gaulle's return in 1958 was the only way this situation could be resolved.

Q: France was quite split, I suppose, at that time. Did you detect this?

MCKESSON: The interesting thing was that in May of 1958 there were relatively few Gaullist. The Gaullist Party still existed, but it was certainly a minority party; the majority of politicians, of course, were against any return of de Gaulle for he was opposed to the party system and I would say that the majority of Frenchmen were not particularly interested or in favor of de Gaulle; they sort of saw him as the hero who had saved them during the war, but as the Algerian crisis got worse and worse, and they saw themselves faced with this virtually insoluble position with the Army controlling Algeria, the Army itself was sort of pushed to call for de Gaulle. Most of the generals did not want de Gaulle, Salan did not want de Gaulle. Massu was one of the few Gaullists, and certainly the majority of the colons in Algeria did not want de Gaulle. It was really very ironic that de Gaulle,...

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Q: John, why don't you just continue with the point you were making about the reaction to de Gaulle.

MCKESSON: It is well-known historically that as the crisis got worse and each side saw no other outcome but a civil war with the Army moving in, which nobody wanted, de Gaulle seemed the only alternative. At that point de Gaulle's name was mentioned more and more and was accepted by everyone as really the second choice of almost everybody, the only one who would satisfy both the Algerian and metropolitan French, partly, of course, because nobody knew what de Gaulle's policy in Algeria really was, and everybody was assuming, or wishing, that he favored his or her view. De Gaulle played on this very beautifully and only very slowly revealed his position in the coming months and years.

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I might add one detail about de Gaulle, concerning his linguistic abilities. I was at the reception given by President Johnson on the 8th floor of the State Department when all these various chiefs of state came to Washington for the Kennedy state funeral, and I was standing in line close to Johnson (I was in S/S at the time) to help out as needed, and all these various heads of government or state would come by the receiving line and Johnson would shake hands with them and they would move on. When de Gaulle came, Johnson took him apart and they moved away from the receiving line for about five minutes together. I was struck by the fact that they must have spoken English as Johnson did not speak any French. De Gaulle, if he had to, could obviously carry on a conversation in English.

Q: By the time you left Paris, de Gaulle was well-established?

MCKESSON: De Gaulle had been established, during the period the Algerian war was going on. There were two very close calls, the Week of the Barricades which nearly toppled the government and the Putsch of the Generals, two years later. In both cases de Gaulle went on television with his uniform and made a very impassioned speech which was very moving and turned the situation around.

Q: When you left Paris you went back to Washington?

MCKESSON: Yes, I was first in the Personnel Operations Division, the so-called POD for a couple of years, then sent to the National War College, where I was a student for a year, 1962-63, and then I was assigned as Deputy Executive Secretary in the Executive Secretariat, S/S, as it was known, under Ben Read. That was for a little over a year. That was a fascinating period. I worked directly for Rusk, Ball (who was number two) and Averell Harriman (who was number three) in the State Department, as a sort of glorified paper pusher. I would take things to them from the Department that had moved up through S/S and also things that came from the White House and things that went to the White House, and the most top secret documents came through my hands.

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Q: When was that?

MCKESSON: 1963-64. I got to see a great deal of Dean Rusk, George Ball and Averell Harriman and noted how disparate their styles were. Dean Rusk, for example, used all of his personal assistants in a hierarchical way; he would get them to do what they were supposed to do, but he would never really ask them their opinions on anything, and would go directly to the assistant secretary, the people who were supposed to be in charge of these areas. So the people who worked directly for Dean Rusk were sort of kept doing their staff function, but never really being brought into the big picture directly, whereas both George Ball and Averell Harriman operated very differently. George Ball had assistants like George Springsteen and Averell Harriman had an assistant by the name of William Sullivan, who of course has gone on to great fame, and I am convinced that working for Harriman had a lot to do with it. As opposed to working for Dean Rusk, Harriman would discuss things with Bill Sullivan and use him in preparing papers and everything, and Ball did likewise with George Springsteen.

Q: Rusk really used the system?

MCKESSON: Rusk was really a system man, using it the way it was supposed to be used, I guess. I am not really trying to say who was right or who was wrong. If you are interested I have a couple of thoughts that occurred to me about the time when I was in S/S as to some traits of American diplomacy that I find rather amazing, one of which I might call the "arrogance of power" in the case of American senior officials where our top people just assume that Americans are so much more important than everyone else that others should fall in line with what we want. For instance, when Harriman was going to Moscow for the negotiations and signing of the non-proliferation treaty with the Russians, which was a very big achievement, which he did very well, it just so happened that Spaak, who was the Foreign Minister of Belgium, had been in Moscow just the week before. Harriman thought it would be a good idea to get Spaak's reactions to what the Russian leadership's mood was in Moscow. It somehow was not convenient for Harriman to go

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through Brussels; he was going through London. He simply sent word to the Belgians that “could Spaak come to meet him at his hotel in London and brief him as he was going on to Moscow for his important job?” Well, Spaak, of course, simply said he was terribly sorry, but it wasn't convenient because of some other commitments. I often thought that Harriman, as the number three in our State Department, expecting the number one in another country's foreign office just to make a trip to talk to him was rather amazing. I am sure that the Belgians, even if Spaak had not been busy, would not have sent him there anyway.

I could give you any number of examples, and will give you one more. When George Ball decided at one point that the Portuguese were really not getting off the dime in Africa, and were continuing their colonial system after everybody else had given up on it, this bothered him so much that he actually spent many hours writing a long, long letter—it must have been ten pages or more to Salazar— explaining why Portugal was doing this all wrong, and trying to convince him by good legal arguments and others why the Portuguese should change their policy towards Africa and sent off the letter. Well, of course, he did not get any answer right away. I remember even a month or so later hearing him comment, “Well, that is the last time I will bother with anybody like Salazar”. The thought, I suppose, never occurred to him that Ball was number two in our foreign ministry, and Salazar was chief of state in another country, and one would have thought that the letter might have been drafted by Ball, but if it was so important and if it was intended to convince Salazar, shouldn't it have gone through the White House and been signed by Kennedy, or at least by the Secretary of State himself, but apparently not. Eventually, oddly enough, Salazar did reply to Ball, and of course refuted every one of his arguments. It accomplished absolutely nothing.

Q: All of which were probably irrelevant to his position?

MCKESSON: They were arguments that he must have heard a thousand times and dismissed.

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Q: That is a trait that I am afraid is not only characteristic of many American leaders, it is also characteristic of people who came into the government from other professions.

MCKESSON: Absolutely, they have little sense of the normal workings of foreign affairs.

Q: Very full of themselves.

MCKESSON: Maybe unable to understand how other people would think differently. I remember when our ambassador in Cyprus had to be moved out immediately for some reason (perhaps he was ill, I forget) and the Department decided to send somebody else to replace him as ambassador and we wanted him there immediately, before the formalities were completed. We sent our charg# a message to say that Toby Belcher was being sent to run the embassy as charge until a new ambassador arrived. Well the DCM felt naturally that this was a complete slap in the face, that he was felt to be incompetent. He could understand if they would send an ambassador, but the Desk was sending someone else simply to be charg# until the new ambassador arrived! He was so indignant that he wrote a strong telegram that since the Department had no confidence in him he would ask for an immediate transfer, which they gave him. I remember George Ball commenting that he could not understand how anybody could act so stupidly and of course the poor man was not only transferred out, but his career was pretty much ruined from then on. It never occurred to George Ball that a person who was DCM would react that way, to send somebody else to simply replace him as charg#, but as you say, the workings of the system were not all that well understood or the political appointees were not that interested.

Q: They are very full of themselves and not very interested in how the system works.

MCKESSON: They were determined to drive policies that had no relation with what the people on the spot thought. During that whole period, I remember George Ball, I don't want to sound critical of him in particular, I think he is a brilliant man in many respects, but as I

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already said, he was very anti-de Gaulle. He was carrying on a policy by a small group of people, like Schaetzel, Dick Vine, Dean Hinton, and others, who really operated a whole policy which to my observation, having been in both Paris and Washington in those years, did not reflect the view of the people in the embassy or the attitude of the people on the French desk. They were much more understanding of de Gaulle and the French position. But Ball's group produced things like this multi-lateral force, which was a non-starter and anybody could have told them that, but they were convinced that they would shove it down the throats of the French and everybody else. Of course when it completely collapsed it was the fault of the wicked French, when to my mind it was a stupid idea to begin with.

Q: They were Atlanticists, weren't they?

MCKESSON: They were Atlanticists, they had wonderful ideals, and ideals that in the long run will save the day for the West, Europe and everybody, but you have to move slowly, realistically, you can't cram it down the throats of Europeans who simply were not prepared for it.

Q: From S/S was that your last stop in Washington?

MCKESSON: Yes, I went from there to Senegal, but I did come back to Washington for a tour as office director for West Africa.

Q: In Senegal you were DCM?

MCKESSON: I was DCM. That was a very pleasant tour. Nothing sensational happened. I did get to know Senghor and the present president, Abdou Diouf, quite well for Abdou Diouf was secretary general of the presidency at the time, and a very bright man, hard working, intelligent, sincere and dedicated. I am a great admirer of both Senghor and Diouf, and most of the other Senegalese I knew. The problem with Senegal in a nutshell, as anyone who has studied the area knows, is that it is very poor country with few natural resources that has achieved a standard of living that can only be maintained through

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foreign aid. So how long does this go on? I suppose it could go on indefinitely, but it creates a very difficult situation. Austerity has to be constantly pushed on people who after decades are getting tired of it.

Q: Did the U.S. have a very well developed African policy at the time you were there?

MCKESSON: It is hard to say. When Soapy Williams was Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, he was, of course, very pro-African and very keen on pushing Africa. Very proud that he had been appointed Assistant Secretary for Africans Affairs by President Kennedy even before Dean Rusk had been chosen as Secretary, but he was terribly ineffective in the Department as I found out when I was in S/S. The different bureaus compete with each other for the attention of the Secretary and the White House, and some Bureaus were very skillful at it, such as IO [International Organizations]; it always got its papers around to everybody. It was a past master, while incompetent bureaus were always left behind. Whenever there was a conflict between EUR and AF over the policies of the colonial powers vis a vis the African powers, EUR would do better in pushing their papers through than the African Bureau. This was seen by somebody like myself in S/S. We would go back to AF and say "You have to improve your paper" to help them, but you cannot do anything beyond what the bureaus produce, and some bureaus produce very well-written papers that hit the mark and papers that come from other bureaus are constantly beside the mark; they obviously are not going to fare as well.

Q: It does make a much greater difference than it should, doesn't it?

MCKESSON: Much more than it should. In this case, of course, probably Africa would have ended up at the tail end anyway, because it was the area of least interest to everyone. Later on during the Kissinger period, it was obvious that Africa was treated with benign neglect, which was the best way of describing our policy.

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Q: When you actually went to Dakar, how did the Washington approach to Africa look from there?

MCKESSON: It was a strange period. The ambassador was Mercer Cook, one of the finest gentlemen I had ever known. He was a black American who had been a Howard University professor for many years and had had one tour of duty as ambassador to Niger. He was a political appointee, appointed by Kennedy. Then Kennedy sent him to Dakar, partially because he had been a classmate of Senghor, and he had known Senghor all his life, had translated some of his books, and had taught about Senghor at Howard. They were close friends. Cook arrived as a really intelligent, well-informed man who was determined to do a good job. As he saw it, his job was to get aid for Senegal and Senegal was certainly a deserving country. Unfortunately in those early days of independence the feeling in Washington was, for some strange reason, that the wave of the future was in countries like Guinea, Mali and Ghana, and people like Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Modibo Keita. People like Senghor and Houphouet-Boigny, were considered hopelessly neo-colonialists, who were just expected to fade away. Well, history proved exactly the opposite. Nkrumah was overthrown, Guinea went completely downhill, Modibo Keita was finally overthrown and Senghor and Houphouet continued and did fairly well.

To get back to my point, the Department was giving more aid to Guinea, which was pro-Marxist at the time, than it was to Senegal, which was very friendly to us and where we had sent an ambassador who was a personal friend of the president. Ambassador Cook tried very hard to reverse that and get more aid for Senegal and when Washington continued to turn a deaf ear, he simply up and resigned. This was the only case that I know of an ambassador resigning purely out of moral reasons. He disapproved of our policy. Of course I became *chargé* as a result of it, but I hated to see him go like that.

Q: That was the situation the whole time you were in Senegal?

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MCKESSON: The whole time. It was a continuing battle between Cook and Washington, with his staff in Dakar trying to persuade Washington to be more forthcoming to Senegal. The Department gave a little, but basically turning a deaf ear because it was convinced that Senegal wasn't important and that all the pro-communist countries would be the wave of the future.

Q: Did they feel that Senegal was part of the French...

MCKESSON: That was another thing, absolutely. There were two things against Senegal; it was conservative, pro-West, and seemed sort of reactionary and also because it was very close to France, and still is, was another factor; let the French take care of it.

Q: What was your impression of the French in Senegal; were they very active in the administration?

MCKESSON: They were very active indeed. The French ambassador was a very active ambassador, a very strong person, Jean de la Garde.

Q: You must have had good relations with the French.

MCKESSON: My relations were good and I was able to get honest opinions from them on rather delicate subjects. It became clear not only with embassy people but with business people that they still had - mind you I arrived in Senegal in 1964 - there was still a feeling, a fear, that the United States was going to move into Africa as we had in Indochina, that somehow we were going to push the French out, stop their influence, and be the dominant force in Africa. This lingered on during most of my tour, but it was beginning to fade by the time I left, perhaps even before, because eventually the facts spoke for themselves. We gave so little aid to most of these African countries and were not interested in them at all, so that any fear that we were going to pull a Vietnam gradually vanished from the French

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minds. That was the only concern that caused some tenseness between the French and the Americans, but it vanished as our lack of interest in Africa became evident.

Q: Then you went back to Washington to deal with Africa

MCKESSON: That's right, I went back to Washington thinking that maybe I could get into some other part of the world, perhaps back to Europe. But as fate would have it I became an African fixture in the Department from then on. I was first Office Director for West African Affairs very briefly and then Office Director for Central African Affairs and spent a little over three years in Washington handling those countries of Africa from the Washington end.

Q: Did the Bureau seem as inept when you were in it as it seemed when you were in S/S?

MCKESSON: Well, I think it was improving in the sense that we had more skillful assistant secretaries. Joe Palmer was more skillful at bureaucratic operations than Soapy Williams had been, and David Newsom, who was assistant secretary towards the end of my period there, was of course very able. I think that by then the Africa Bureau was doing a better job but the end result that Africa was at the bottom of the White House interest never really changed much. That really had nothing to do with the effectiveness of the bureaus; it was something beyond that. Washington was very interested in Africa when a particular crisis would come up, such as the Biafra war in Nigeria. Of course everybody concentrated on the Biafran war, and South Africa had always been a problem of concern, and then the Rhodesia issue came up. But outside of things like Rhodesia where, for instance, Kissinger did get involved in the rest of West Africa, Central Africa, my two tours of Africa were spent without any real evidence of interest or concern from Washington.

Q: That must have made your work in Washington somewhat unsatisfactory. You did not have too much chance for contact with the Seventh Floor [where the Secretary and Under Secretaries have their offices].

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MCKESSON: Exactly, the Seventh Floor was just not that interested. From a purely selfish point of view it had an advantage because you could sort of run things on your own; in the bureau in Washington most of the telegrams were approved at the office or assistant secretary levels. We rarely had to get clearance from the Secretary or the top people, only in a very unusual crisis situation.

I did have the opportunity - maybe this is worth mentioning as it ties in with my next assignment after Washington in Gabon - Gabon is a country where we had, during the time I was in Washington, increasingly bad relations. It started well before my time, from the day of our first ambassador to Gabon, Ambassador Darlington. There were essentially two reasons; Darlington has written a book about it. He was blamed for a coup that took place that was thwarted by the French, and somebody had to be a scapegoat and so word was passed that the U.S. was involved. Of course we had not been. From then on the Gabonese were very suspicious of the Americans and the least little thing would lead to the Gabonese being incensed and retaliating in some minor way and Washington, oblivious to what was going on, would retaliate against their retaliations and relations kept going from bad to worse. They would improve a little and then go bad again. They were bad under Ambassador Funkhouser who was ambassador before I was. To my mind, when I began looking at the dossier, it all seemed so totally ridiculous. Here was a small country, rather well off, with the highest per capita income in Black Africa, because of its natural resources of oil, manganese, uranium and so forth. With American firms quite active there, the U.S. controlled half the manganese ore and Bethlehem Steel had big investments in an iron ore mountain; we had Gulf Oil operating off-shore. The president of the country was very anti-communist, wanted to have good relations with everybody in the West, and there we were going on, for no reason at all, getting our relations in a mess. Finally it came to a head while I was toward the end of my tour in Washington when the embassy had recommended that we do something fairly drastic, I forget what it was, with regard to the Gabonese in connection with the fact that one of our officers had traveled to an area where he had been told not to and the Gabonese had retaliated

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in some way. Anyway it was all such nonsense, that I can remember recommending through David Newsom, to Secretary Rogers at the time, that we not follow the embassy's recommendation but try to see if we could patch up things with Gabon. It so happened that the President of Gabon was coming to Washington, and the Secretary decided to follow the AF Bureau's advice and had a very friendly meeting with Bongo, the president of Gabon. Bongo was very pleased to be so well-received and that really was the beginning of a complete turn-around in our relations. It just so happens that shortly after that I was sent as ambassador to Gabon, and I continued that policy of trying to get good relations, and in a very short order relations improved tremendously and in fact got to be excellent and have remained excellent ever since, because there never was any reason why they should have been bad. To my mind it was just an example of how relations could get to be bad between countries at times with no real substantive reason other than because of little pinpricks that are misinterpreted by both sides.

Q: The human element.

MCKESSON: Much more than it should. I might say that at times our government is guilty of this. Maybe I can draw a general conclusion on this subject. I was very impressed - as you know since leaving the service I have been teaching courses on Africa and done some research on how the French operate - a perfect example to me is how the French operated vis a vis Madagascar. There was a coup there and the Madagascar government turned very anti-French and threw the French military out the country—the French had a big base at Diego Suarez. The Malagasy left the franc zone, cut off virtually all trade relations, threw out most of the French firms, and the president of the country and the foreign minister made stinging speeches insulting the French for colonialism and everything possible and imaginable. Pompidou, was president of France at the time. Many of his advisors, felt he should cut off all aid and all contacts with the Malagasies. Pompidou decided just the opposite; he decided with great dignity that he was not going to get into a shouting match and continued French economic assistance and French cultural assistance to the country, withdrew the troops and just rode with the punches. The country went downhill

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economically rapidly, because breaking off with the franc zone and throwing out all the French firms caused great problems, but the fact the French aid continued meant that little by little relations were improved and in a few years relations between Madagascar and France were excellent again. Whereas I think that we, with small countries, especially African ones which we don't consider important, if something is done that is considered insulting to the United States, we just write them off and say, "Who do they think they are?" and pull out in pique, which is a childish way of acting.

Q: So, John, when you did go to Gabon in 1970 I would suppose also your familiarity with the French would have helped restore a more fruitful relationship with the Gabonese. As I remember your account, the French had been instrumental in the difficulty we had with Gabon following the coup and the French intervention in it.

MCKESSON: There is no doubt about it. By the time I got there, the French ambassador was clearly interested in having good relations with the Americans and I think there was definitely a feeling that these bad relations had been something that they, the French, had been responsible for originally, back in '64 and were feeling kind of embarrassed about it, although they never admitted it.

The whole thing goes back to the period when there was a spontaneous coup led by a group of young Gabonese officers who walked into the President's office with no problem at all, arrested him and had him resign on television and took over. Within twenty-four hours when this news came to Paris de Gaulle decided that this was intolerable and had troops flown in and landed at the Libreville airport without any opposition by the Gabonese. No sooner did they get out of the plane than they marched into town and took over the government and put Leon Mba, the president who had been deposed, back in office and arrested all the ones involved in the coup. This of course seemed rather high handed and even in French Africa it was looked upon rather poorly. Needless to say, all over the world, particularly in the Third World, and also in the communist world, it was very badly received. Immediately at that time stories began floating that all the French had

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done was put back in office the president the Gabonese really wanted and that the whole coup had been done by a small group of people inspired and financed by some foreign power. It was obvious by the way these stories were floated that the Americans were the ones who through the CIA had been guilty of this. Of course, the French never officially said anything and it was hard to trace these rumors to the French, but one can assume that they had a hand in it. They were the only ones who could profit by this story. The Gabonese, themselves, bought it lock, stock and barrel and even years later when I was in Gabon and relations had become excellent, Bongo would refer jokingly about the fact that relations were good and not like the old days when "you were plotting things against us". Of course, I said, "Mr. President, we never were." The irony of the whole thing was that our poor first ambassador, Charles Darlington, who had tried really hard to have good relations with everybody, had received a telegram just a day or two before the coup, in which he was asked if there was any truth that there might be a coup in the offing, that our people in Paris had picked up word of it through some contacts in Paris. He sent back a telegram that this was absolutely absurd, there was no danger of a coup at all, the government was firmly ensconced. I know that story because Randy Kidder was in the inspection corps at the time and was inspecting Gabon and was shown the Department telegram and the telegram that Darlington sent back. It was in a few hours after that the coup broke out and Randy Kidder and others were confined to a hotel room because there was shooting going on outside and a coup took place. So in the end Darlington found himself, in effect, accused by the French and Gabonese of having plotted a coup and criticized by the State Department for being so inept to deny that a coup would take place, when a coup actually did take place. So it is not too surprising that the title of his memoirs was *African Betrayal*. He felt he was betrayed by everybody, the Africans he tried to help, his French colleagues and the State Department. He had, of course, let himself open to criticism by making a standard practice, as he wrote in his book, of receiving opposition elements, anybody who wanted to come by his residence to come in for a cup of coffee and shoot the breeze. Of course, nobody from the government would show up at these gatherings and it was just the opposition who would walk in and out of Darlington's home in the evening. This did not

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sit too well with the local government. Anyway, he was well intentioned and it was sad he was blamed by some for doing something he didn't do and blamed by others for not having foreseen it.

Q: When you went there finally as your first post as ambassador, how did that strike you, the difference being in a post in some other capacity and being in charge?

MCKESSON: It was a very pleasant experience, one I fully enjoyed for the four years I was there and one which in a sense was even more satisfying than being ambassador in a large post, although that would have had compensations. You felt that you really could run the show practically on your own because Washington had very little input most of the time. For example, the chief of state of many of these African countries like Bongo, in the case of Gabon, or Bokassa or many of the others saw so little of other Americans, had so little contact with those outside the American ambassador that anything the American ambassador said or did was magnified. If he said the wrong thing our relations with the country could go down the drain or might even be broken. Conversely our relations could be greatly improved if the ambassador did something that the government appreciated. If you were ambassador to Paris it is obvious that M. Mitterrand, or whoever is president of France, is not going to form his opinion of the United States on the basis of the American ambassador. He is going to have contact with the president of the United States constantly, and the foreign minister has contact at the top level at all times, so the role of the American ambassador in forming the opinion of the local country is, of course, much less. You did have the feeling that you were a big frog in a very little pond; but you at least, for better or worse, had in your hands the fate of American policy in that little part of the globe.

Q: You really were the representative of the United States.

MCKESSON: Absolutely. That was a feeling that you got. There were lots of interesting things just running an embassy with nothing to do with basic foreign policy. One has to

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be imaginative in little problems. I remember one occasion I was at the airport along with the rest of the diplomatic corps and the government and hundreds of other people when Bongo was returning from a trip from Europe. As was his wont, he made a little speech to the people who had to show up at the airport whenever he came or left, and after saying a lot of the usual things he said, "By the way I noticed that when I was in Dakar some very nice French and American cultural centers, and I just want to tell the French ambassador and the American ambassador who are here somewhere.." and everyone was looking at me .."that their cultural centers are pretty shabby and I expect them to improve them". It was difficult for me as I had received a telegram shortly before that from USIA that they thought their activities in Gabon were so unimportant that they were thinking of cutting down or perhaps even eliminating the whole operation. So here I had Washington wanting to practically do away with the cultural center and Bongo expecting me to build a big one, twice the size and very impressive. These are the type of things that ambassadors have to deal with. Somehow I managed. It was not easy; after reporting all this I finally convinced USIA first of all not to cancel altogether and then to send me a few thousand dollars. There was a residence one of our officers was living in, the PAO [Public Affairs Officer], which belonged to the U.S. government, and we were renting a not too impressive center, the one Bongo was complaining about. So I used the rental money simply to rent another residence for the PAO, and used the PAO residence that we owned as a center. We spent \$5,000 to buy a very large sort of gilded grillwork and put in on the front of the residence which made it look like a shiny, sort of official building of some kind, and made the former residence of the PAO into the cultural center. It was much more impressive when you were looking at it from the street, but actually we had not put any more money into the country; we pleased Bongo and USIA. We really hadn't changed anything. We had the same number of books and films, but we looked like we had a more impressive center and the whole thing cost USIA \$5,000. Everybody seemed to be happy. But it was a narrow escape. I could have neglected altogether to pick up on Bongo's comments, but it was these little things that were useful if you wanted to keep good relations.

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Q: While you were there, was there much of a flow of Americans through, or was it quite isolated.

MCKESSON: No, as I mentioned Gabon does have economic interests with the United States so we had people coming constantly from the oil companies, Union Carbide, various engineering firms, and getting good relations did pay off. I can recall a couple of instances. Bongo wanted to build a railroad, which ended up costing a couple of billion dollars, from Libreville inland to where the manganese and uranium are, to evacuate the manganese which otherwise had to go out by Congo, Brazzaville. I persuaded AID to contribute a little to it. When the Gabonese finally got the money together, mostly from other sources, the question came of letting out bids, and the first thing I knew the bids were all going to French, German and other European countries and I noticed that no American firm had received any contract. The president was out of the country; so I got on the phone and managed to reach him in Paris and said that he had very kindly mentioned on many occasions that Gabon was not the *chasse gardée* [closed preserve] of anybody and that he wanted good relations with Americans and wanted more American investment. I thought that one way he could prove this was by giving us some contracts in the building of the railroad. I noticed that he had just given the contract for all locomotives to some European firm. He thought for awhile while we chatted a bit, and then he took a decision on the spot that he would give half the contract to Americans and half to Europeans, so that General Motors, I think, ended up getting a contract for a number of locomotives as a result of this phone call. A type of call that could only be made because I had built up good relations with him.

Q: How about American government people? I don't suppose you had too many Congressmen and senators trooping through?

MCKESSON: Not many, not too many. We did have some. We had the director of the Ex-Im Bank, some Congressmen, but nobody terribly significant. Another example comes to my mind of how good relations are very helpful. Bongo once received a letter

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which somebody had given him from some unknown source which was one of these disinformation things, a forgery, supposedly a letter from the CIA to one of their agents describing how we were plotting to overthrow Bongo. Of course he was quite upset about it and called me in immediately. Fortunately I was able to point out several discrepancies in just the way the heading appeared on the paper and the language could not have been anything that any American agency could have sent. But I said that if he wanted a more authoritative opinion I could have somebody come out from Washington to discuss it. He believed me and eventually somebody did come out from Washington and he was completely sold that this was obviously a fabrication. I think that the Department eventually decided that this was a Czech fabrication, but it was in any case an East Bloc fabrication. What was particularly interesting was that not only did this not cause any problems which we might have had otherwise, but some months later Bokassa in the Central African Republic received a somewhat similar fake forgery accusing the Americans. He, on the other hand, was quite prepared to believe it and was all set to expel, PNG [persona non grata] our ambassador and break relations and I don't know what not. The Department sent me that information because of my experience with Bongo, and in the end, what transpired was that Bongo volunteered to talk to Bokassa and persuade him that it was a fake. So Bongo not only believed me in the case of the forgery that involved him and his country, but he was also instrumental in getting the head of state of another country to realize that this was a fake as a result of the ground work that we had been able to do.

Q: Did you feel that when you were ambassador in Gabon that there was any interest from the White House at all, or was your contact with the Department in the normal way?

MCKESSON: Well Bongo, as do the chiefs of state all over the world, wanted a White House visit, and did get to Washington a couple of times on an official visit and a private visit, but mostly, of course, the relations remained between the embassy and the State Department and never went beyond the State Department because there was normally no reason. The developments were not important enough to go to the White House.

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Q: Was Bongo's official visit during your stay?

MCKESSON: Yes, I went back with him, and he went out to the West Coast after the official Washington DC part of his tour. I accompanied him the whole way. It was all very satisfactory except it did show how our perceptions differed. To cite a little example, Bongo was entertained in Washington. He had an appointment at the White House, he had a reception by Spiro Agnew. Then the Gabonese themselves put on a big show with Gabonese dancers at the Kennedy Center, partly to show the Gabonese dancers, but partially as a return of hospitality. He invited all the top Americans who had received him. Well, he was told immediately to forget about getting the President of the United States, so he did not expect that, but neither the Secretary nor Under Secretary of State nor anybody on the Seventh Floor [the executive floor of the Department of State] showed up. The Assistant Secretary for African Affairs for some reason did not come. There was virtually no one, I think the desk officer for Gabon was the only American who showed up at the reception and there was Bongo in his box with his wife and a few senior Gabonese expecting to have the top Americans with them. I was not even invited to his box, I was given a fine seat elsewhere. Just as the performance began, a Gabonese protocol officer came rushing up to me and said "Mr. Ambassador, you have to come and sit in the box with the President, there has to be somebody." I sat there very embarrassed, realizing the only reason I was sitting there was because absolutely nobody of any importance in Washington had considered it of enough importance to come.

Q: That was a continuing problem in the government. It was perfectly understandable, we had so many visitors, those here could not stretch themselves that thin, yet it was a certain lack of appreciation of the human touch that is required in diplomacy. Washington is such a huge bureaucracy that sometimes it was a little opaque to that kind of requirement. Somehow our friends, such as the African leaders, manage to put up with it.

MCKESSON: Of course, they understood. They knew they were not that important in the world scene and took it in stride, but one wonders sometimes. These leaders were well

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received, not only in Paris where de Gaulle received all these chiefs of state at least once a year, but also in places like Moscow where the head of the Soviet Union seemed to find more time for African visitors than our own president.

Q: As you reached the end of your tour in Gabon, your last post, did you decide that was it?

MCKESSON: Well, I was debating. I was quite interested in staying on in the Service. I was asked if I wanted to go as ambassador to Zaire, which would have been a step up, but it would have meant a third tour in a row in Africa. I was tempted. But it so happened I was offered a job in Paris in private business making about three times as much money. The idea of being in Paris and making more money rather than a third tour in Africa somehow persuaded me to leave the service. So I took early retirement.

Q: Zaire would have been difficult.

MCKESSON: It would have been interesting, but I thought I would try something different and I haven't regretted it. I had a very interesting experience in Paris.

Q: Is there anything else you want to make as a valedictory statement regarding your career or relations with Africa?

MCKESSON: No, it was a fascinating career, I enjoyed every bit of it and I think that the role of the Foreign Service abroad can still be very important. A small example of what I was able to do in Gabon. Gabon had thrown out the Peace Corps several years ago after the Darlington fiasco and the squabbles that we had. I suspected that after relations improved Bongo might change his mind on it, but I never said anything. One day, half way through my tour, the president called me in and said he wanted the Peace Corps back. The way he said it of course was as if I would jump up and down with glee and send it in the next day. I said to the president that I was very appreciative that he wanted the Peace Corps, but I would have to see if it was possible to bring the Peace Corps back. It turned

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out it was, and the Peace Corps was very glad to open up again in Gabon. But things like that show that if you do build up good relations you can accomplish a great deal.

Q: Yes, all the communications equipment in the world cannot really replace the human factor. Thank you very much John.

End of interview